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ABSTRACT

Schools can be changed from the inside if one works with the dynamics that schools respond to. Four generalizations about the change in the schools are that: 1) Innovations must be comprehensible to the leadership of schools, i.e., innovations must be introduced to the administrators of schools as well as teachers -- administrators need to understand the new practice, approve of it, and give it leadership and encouragement; 2) Innovations must come from administrators (top down to make it legitimate) and teachers (bottom up to keep it honest), i.e., the role needs of the administrator and the teacher must be met as part of an innovation strategy; 3) The strategy for introducing an innovation has to be consistent with the local reward system; and 4) Innovations must be locally verifiable and modifiable at the classroom level. (Author/SJM)

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Change in Schools:

an Insider's Look

A paper prepared for the National Seminar on the Diffusion of New Instructional Materials and Practices, under the auspices of the Social Science Education Consortium, the Diffusion Project, Indiana University, the American Political Science Association, and the National Council for the Social Studies.

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This paper is set in motion by a number of oft-repeated questions, put to me by the Directors of the present seminar: What can be done (to bring about change) within the present structure of the schools? Why is the school so difficult to move in the direction of change? At what point is it necessary to create an alternative system of education? Is it really necessary to "deschool" the school?

These questions, as is immediately recognizable, are put on a rising crescendo: can we do anything with the school as it is, or should we ultimately seek to destroy it?

Let me respond at once that the creation of an alternative school system, and the "deschooling" of society, on a massive basis, do not appear to be available options at present. It is likely that alternative schools will continue to be organized and to live their relatively short half-lives, and that a very small number of children will participate in

them. It is even possible that a "deschooled" society will be set up, here or there--indeed, we have in certain Amish communities just such societies now--but it scarcely seems likely that the country as a whole, or even large portions of it, will undertake the trauma that "deschooling" implies.

I shall, therefore, confine what I have to say to the questions that pertain to the present school situation, with an eye to its likely evolution.

As Seymour Sarason points out (in The Culture o. the School and the Problem of Change), any attempt to understand the folkways of the school must begin with an acknowledgement of the enormously complicated institution we seek to deal with. As he says, the criticisms levelled at the school from outside the institution are also made within it, and have always been. The role requirements within the school, he belives, are full of conflict and complexity, and are only slightly understood, even by those who inhabit them.

If Sarason is right (and his remarks ring true to me), then responses to the questions from the Directors that might make a difference cannot be based on a comprehensive theory of social change, applied to the schools. What is required is that we apply such informed common sense as is available to us. I shall try to respond to the questions from that stance. I have (as has Sarason) been in a helping relationship to schools and school systems for a long time; earlier, for a long time, I participated in two school systems as an employee. It is out of this experience that I wish to extract four generalizations about change in the schools.

1. <u>If an innovation is not comprehensible to the leadership of the schools, it will be trivialized or aborted.</u>

This notion might be put differently: the quality of the offering in a school cannot rise above the level of educational sophistication of the principal and superintendent. Or, more bluntly: the quality of instruction cannot rise above the quality of the administrators' minds.

In one of the large cities some years ago, the Curriculum Department finally succeeded in persuading the Purchasing Department to furnish easels for instruction in elementary Art. The innovation had been established elsewhere in the country for a good many years; this city's Art people were embarrassed at the backwardness of their system in this respect; feelings ran high, and at last two easels, accommodating four children at a time, were provided for each elementary classroom. The Curriculum Department, following its usual ritual, prepared a guide for their use, to be sent to the schools as the easels were delivered. The guide was pretty good, as guides go: the advantages of easels were pointed out; the writers took advantage of the occasion to reteach some elementary matters concerning children and Art; it was suggested that, ideally, children should have two or three opportunities per week to use the easel.

Two or three opportunities per week, divided into classes of thirty-five children, with four easels, presented a management problem. It was solved, of course: a new subject, "easel," appeared in the curriculum. Whatever Johnny was doing, at 11:20, his turn at the easel came along, and he was told, "Stop the Math, Johnny, it's time for Easel." Never underestimate the ability of the system to trivialize the curriculum.

Similarly, the Open Classroom is viewed in many a school as an arrangement of space. Deep disagreements are explored over whether it is better to have an open classroom, an open corridor, operable walls, a Relaxing Corner, and so on.

How does such nonsense happen? Typically, because there is no one in the immediate school situation who either really believes in the innovation, or who understands it in any important way. The key person is always the principal. Some of us worked hard to de-regiment the teaching in a set of six first grade classes in a school near Teachers College. The principal visited the classrooms a few times, and once announced her approval of what was being done: "I would have thought these classes were too noisy, except that I see the children working. The noise is incdient to the work." Quite an insight for an old-liner. But at the end of the year, at a meeting, having congratulated the teachers on the improved climate in their classrooms, she aborted the whole effort by saying that it had not improved the reading scores, and was therefore of no importance. Thus ended the project.

I have watched teachers using the SCIS curriculum to teach vocabulary; scratch a primary teacher, and you have a reading teacher; the properties of objects are also (and to some teachers more importantly) adjectives: smooth, hard, flexible, heavy, and so on.

Such slippage is, perhaps, inevitable. But it tends to continue, if the supervising officers in our hierarchical school systems don't understand the new practice, approve of it, and give it leadership and encouragement. The basic motivation of the middle management school official is to keep the top management at bay; the basic motivation of the top management is to keep the Board of Education off its neck, and to gain a good press. None of them is

primarily interested in the quality of the offering. The offering, for the officials, is an instrument for achieving upper-level approval.

What follows from this school-of-hard-knocks wisdom is this: in introducing a curricular innovation, include the administrators in the training. Refuse to offer the training unless the administrators will undertake it. Never, never, assume that orientation of the teachers is sufficient, for the teachers are not the key persons in the school system.

A second principle may be derived from the first, as follows:

2. To be successful, an innovation must appear both to come from the top down (thus being legitimated) and from the bottom up (thus being honest).

If the key person is always the principal, the principal may not know it. From the principal's office, the key person appears to be the teacher. Indeed, generally, as one looks down from the top of the hierarchy, responsibility appears to grow as one descends. But from the bottom up, as has been pointed out, legitimation appears to grow as one ascends. If one asks the superintendent who should be oriented to an innovation, he will name the teachers. If one asks the teachers, they will tend to name the administrators. It follows that an innovation must come from both directions, for the teachers keep it honest (or don't) and the administrator, in his role as keeper of the reward system, makes it legitimate.

There is nothing simple about this arrangement. Despite Sloan Wayland's assertion of several years ago, that the teacher is best understood as a bureaucratic functionary, teachers don't view themselves that way. Since the administrator, from the teacher's point of view, is usually ignorant about instruction, the teacher tends to see himself as making basic

professional decisions that are evaluated capriciously by the higher-ups. The teacher's basic attitude toward the administrator, when it comes to instructional matters, is apprehensive. If anything really good is to be done, from the teacher's point of view, the teacher will have to do it. His explanations of what he has done tend to be obscure and vague, for the teacher has found that the more explicit he is, the more likely he is to collide with some trivial prejudice of the administrator.

Administrators have often been good teachers in their time. However, as their experience grows, they find themselves compelled to deal with an ignorant, capricious public; it is not surprising that in time they begin to sound more and more like this public to the teachers who report to them. Acting as "front man" for the teaching staff, the principal and the superintendent are, in the final analysis, in an impossible position: if they fend off parent complaints, they seem unresponsive to the public. If they carry such complaints to the teachers, they seem to take the side of the parents against the teacher. Too often, the function of the principal is to keep parents at bay; if that front is peaceful, the interior of the school can be left to take care of itself.

A double bind, indeed. What happens if an innovation is proposed? It has to be made legitimate, chiefly by the administrators. The administrator, acting out of hard experience, will see it as necessary that the public be convinced that the innovation is an improvement, but he has to present it in a form the public can understand, and make promises that the public will approve of. That's why team teaching was presented as a curriculum innovation, which it is, of course, not.

This apparatus of administrators-who-face-the-public functions as a

protective device for teachers, who by and large do the best they know how in a system outwardly devoted to public relations. If there is honesty in the teaching, it is because the teachers know how to do an honest job. But they can't, if what they do is not made legitimate by the administrators.

That's why innovations have to come from the top down and the bottom up at the same time. How can this be done?

First, through orientation to the innovation that includes the administrators and the teachers, as fellow teachers. Then, by orientation of the administrators that addresses their public relations problems directly. Third (and this is very often overlooked) by providing both administrators and teachers with evidence-gathering devices and approaches that make formative evaluation possible.

It is this last--formative evaluation--that is crucial if the respective role demands of the teachers and administrators are to complement each other. If they dont complement each other, as has been pointed out, the innovation will be ignored, trivialized, or aborted. What is required is this: that the teacher appear to himself as one who knows about teaching, including the adjustment of subject matter to fit his students; that the principal see himself as a participant in instruction with the special task of interpreting the school to the public. A set of formulated teaching strategies, no matter how thoroughly field tested, cannot do this of itself. In the effort to conduct in-service training for new instructional plans quickly--in a matter of weeks--too many curriculum plans have come off prescriptive, and the teacher is treated like Wayland's "bureaucratic functionary."

The alternative was suggested, nearly a generation ago, by the late lamented Action Research movement. This movement, quickly brushed aside by

the formal educational researchers because it didn't fit their rubrics, sought to provide teachers with the means for constantly monitoring the consequences of their teaching efforts; to conduct what is now called formative evaluation. Teachers will believe their own eyes before they will believe what you and I say to them. The main missing ingredient in curriculum reform efforts is provision for the teachers (and thus the administrators) to base modifications of the received plan on evidence. As things stand, teachers typically evaluate such plans on their unexamined sense of how they go in class--does the plan "fly"?

All the models for innovation I have seen provide for frequent, step-by-step evaluation. What they tend to leave out is the possibility that this evaluation might be designed by the actors in the drama--the teachers. I mean to suggest here that this missing part of the innovation strategy be supplied: that not only evaluation instruments, but plans for the development of home-made evaluation instruments, be built into curricular plans. If that is done, then (as happened in a prominent New York high school) PSSC will not be tried for a few terms, then abandoned because the teachers subjectively opined that the new plan was not as good as the one it sought to replace, especially since they knew the properties of the old plan in depth and the new plan was simply a set of prescriptions.

3. Credit for the success of an innovation goes to its originator; blame for a failure is lodged with the classroom teacher. It is not rewarding for a teacher to adopt someone else's innovation.

It should not be necessary to stress the power of the reward system when we consider the fate of innovations in school systems. Apparently, however,

there is something about it that leads to its being overlooked.

One of the school systems I have worked with at some length is well known for the adoption and generation of innovations in education. The reason I was asked to work with these people was that, over a number of years, the system had flown apart. The effect of a large amount of foundation money had been to encourage inventiveness by members of the staff, and a succession of superintendents had been publicized nationally, and had left (chiefly to join the foundation); but morale in the staff was uneven the curriculum leadership group was uncertain of its role, and (most important) innovations were lasting only as long as their originators stayed in place, and were not spreading through the system.

Several problems had produced this situation: the temper of the times, a stereotypic view of the community, happenings in the state and in the neighboring large city. However, the most important part of the problem locally was the reward system. The superintendents were rewarded with national publicity in the Saturday Review and the New York Times and through the efforts of the supporting foundation. This publicity had the effect of defining these leaders locally, so that they were viewed with awe from inside the system. But there was a crucial omission in the reward system inside the system, which was greatly exacerbated by external publicity: the reward for invention within the system was very considerable--perhaps national publicity--but there was no reward for adopting an innovation from within the system. Other systems adopted some of the innovations developed in this system, but the system itself did not. As one of the leaders in the system told me, "the Brownie points went to the innovators, not their imitators."

To recognize this possibility is to recognize ways to deal with it. For the innovator who wishes to institutionalize his innovation, it would be desirable to form inter-school teams of teachers and administrators to develop and redevelop his innovations, thus spreading the credit around and increasing the likelihood that the new approach will spread.

Of equal importance is the sharing of blame. When a nationally recognized curriculum program is adopted locally, and doesn't work, the blame is assigned locally. After all, the national program has proved itself in many places; it has been carefully developed and field tested; obviously, if in Podunk it doesn't work, the fault is in Podunk. Since innovations, as Henry Brickell pointed out, tend to spread from one school system to its near neighbors, one must ask what effect Podunk's failure has on its neighbors. Within a school building, a teacher picks up an idea, or invents one, and tries it out. It doesn't work. The teacher is pitied, or blamed by parents, or is perhaps attacked by the local press. Is it rewarding?

What is required is a far more elaborate follow-up by national curriculum developers than has usually been undertaken. When a national program is undertaken in a local school system, someone from the national staff should monitor it for at least two years, and preferably three or even four, to see it through its early debugging and institutionalization. The national program representative can function importantly to influence the local reward system, precisely because he will be viewed from inside as a disinterested outsider, whose praise arises from not improper motives. When a failure occurs, this outsider can share the blame, or even take it. When a success occurs, he can see to it that the credit goes to the teacher and

the administrator. What is needed is a reward system that recognizes the attempt as well as the success, and gives credit locally for both.

The failure to recognize the nature of the internal reward system isn't the only reason why schools don't change, but it is an important one. It accounts in large measure not only for the apparent "resistance to change," but also for the growth of teacher militancy. When attempts are made to make curriculum plans teacher-proof, and when these attempts are accompanied by a failure to attend to the reward system, the teachers, of course, band together against their tormentors. They do not fail to recognize the implied contempt in such approaches, and they react accordingly.

4. Ergo: innovations must be locally verifiable and locally modifiable, at the classroom level.

It must be remembered that local teachers and administrators are personally responsible for what they do. While the national press and general educational opinion have influence on what local people believe, the influence is far from overwhelming; the trial of innovations is always local. The story of innovation in education is, by and large, a story of failure, ever since the days of the early laboratory schools. The current rage is the open classroom, and the publicity has been deafening, but the local people have heard claims before, and are cautious because they are accountable locally for what they do.

If, however, local people are given the means for making the new idea fit their circumstances and encouraged by the innovators to do so, and if they are given the means for verifying the effectiveness of innovations,

they at least will have the possibility of being responsible local innovators.

This last point has been recognized by some students of educational change, and by some designers of curriculum innovations. But some designers have not recognized it; their proposals are too prescriptive, their plans unverifiable, and institutionalization has been slow.

I vividly remember the time the co-director of a well known Science project appeared at a national convention to convey the Good News that a group of outstanding scientists had redesigned the secondary offering in his field. To my question, "Yes, but suppose you are wrong?", his response was outraged: he said the originator of the project had received a gold medal from his professional association; he strongly implied that I had no right to ask such a question. Well, the enrollment in his field has dropped 10% since the introduction of his program; competing programs have appeared since; the promises trumpeted to the nation in the press have not been kept; indeed, the whole educational research enterprise is under severe attack from national governmental officials.

This sad state of affairs might not have been so general in its impact if the necessities for institutionalization of educational innovations had been observed at the local level. As things stand now, the teachers, who ought to be the principal supporters of educational research and development are apathetic about it.

I suggest that this has happened because the needs internal to public school systems have been overlooked. Let me state them, as they arise from what has already been said:

1. The strategy for introducing an innovation has to be consistent with the local reward system.

2. Innovations must be introduced to the administration of a school system, as well as to the teachers.

3. The role needs of the administrator and the teacher must be met as part of an innovation strategy.

I began these remarks by laying aside two of the questions raised by the directors of the present conference: what about alternative schools? Should we "deschool" society?

While, in their present form, the answers to these questions show little likelihood of becoming the dominant mode for education in the United States (or, indeed, anywhere else in the developed part of the world), they merit attention on a different basis.

Alternative schools have sometimes led the way for the instituional school. Some elements of Summerhill, for example, have found their way into a few alternative schools; some elements of the campus laboratory schools found their way into the Progressive movement, and thus into the public schools. Like the agricultural extension agent, we might do well to foster the development of "experimental plots"; the present appearance of alternative schools can be so considered. The difficulty with these schools at present is that they are defined by what they reject, not by what they seek to do. Where the establishment school has a prestruc tured curriculum, they seek an emergent curriculum. Where the establishment school uses standardized tests as criteria, they seek to have no criteria; where the establishment

school seeks regularity in attendance and schedule, they seek to abolish such regularities. Where the established school is primarily concerned with intellectual development, they reject intellectuality. They have not, so far, affirmed anything on their own except "participatory democracy," which in the days of the Progressives was called "cooperative planning."

If the alternative schools can be kept alive, however, it is to be hoped that some orderly experimentation may be undertaken within them. Curriculum leaders for a long time have hoped that school districts would form experimental educational centers within their organizations. A few were formed, but they perished from lack of intellectual nourishment and budget squeezes. The alternative schools seem a more authentic form of the same thing. They, therefore, should be nurtured, for in the alternative schools, unlike the scattered experimental schools of two decades ago, people are free to make mistakes. There is an élan to an alternative school, at least while it is young. Perhaps such schools ought to have short lives, like a demonstration in any laboratory. Novelty is part of their meaning. Perhaps, in the alternative school, there is being worked out a means for continual renewal of schooling--a quality devoutly to be sought.

As for "deschooling": the proper office of the present school is to offer systematic knowledge, as distinguished from the diffuse knowledge one picks up in the course of unstructured daily life. A "deschooled" society would still have need of systematic knowledge. Where would it be obtained?

Here, as in the case of the alternative schools, we might take advantage of some existing techniques and institutions. Much has been said and attempted

in the way of teacher-proof materials. It is precisely teacher-proof materials that make a formal school unnecessary. If we can develop them, let us by all means do so. Let us not put them in schools, however. Let us make use of that other universal institution, the super-market. To deschool society, put teacher-proof materials in the local A & P. Make mandatory school attendance a little less rigid, so that students may work at home. Provide criterion-referenced evaluation materials, perhaps in the form of the old Dalton contracts. Voila!

There is, of course, a certain irony in these suggestions. Both the alternative schools proposals and the deschooling proposals grow out of revolutionary motives. What I have suggested--and perhaps it should be emphasized that these suggestions are meant seriously--is that both of them be incorporated in a somewhat redefined public school enterprise.

When Andrew Cordier took over as President of Columbia University during the Troubles in 1968, the radical students were faced with a new kind of antagonist. Cordier had, after all, dealt with the Russians at their most negative. In comparison, the students were naive. He quickly defused the movement, and it subsided. Not without diagnosis by the students, however. The editor of the Columbia Spectator saw it clearly. "That _____," he said, "he decapitated our issues!"

So it is, I think, with the public schools. They can be changed, but only if one works with the dynamics that they respond to. If one does, they are likely to adapt in the future, as they have, somewhat, in the past. They are much too entrenched to be taken by storm, but they can be changed from the inside.